



August 2021

## The Power of Translocal Organizing Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

Jackie Smith

Richard Falk's [focus](#) on imagination as the key to global solidarity resonates with work happening in social movements everywhere. Social hierarchies and the divisions they create are at the core of global capitalism, and they are ingrained in our very understandings of identities, cultural histories, and institutions. We need a sociological imagination to understand how powerful groups create and manipulate social divisions so that we can invent pathways towards a more livable, cohesive world. In other words, we need political and legal imagination aimed at transforming the basic institutions of our societies, including schools, media, legal systems, and government. The often overlooked struggles of people around the world provide important knowledge of the “politics of impossibility” required to build the world we need.

A promising path to global solidarity known as “translocalism” characterizes many of today’s struggles for rights and democracy. Translocalism refers to relationships across locales designed to “create new spaces of agency and overcome the constraints posed by a nation-state bounded view. ...[T]hey both transgress and transcend locality and have the ability to change the local spaces from which they emerge.”<sup>1</sup> Translocality distinguishes the identities of people and communities from nation-states, enabling new social and ecological relationships and bases of authority. It helps shift attention from global to local scales, where human and ecological relationships are more visible and valued. Significantly, it is a practice developed through struggle, as people have learned to work across social divisions to build unity and advance shared goals.

Translocal connections that link particular places within global social webs thus enable people to reimagine citizenship and other dimensions of identity. “Placemaking” practices nurture local identities and allegiances to ecosystems and communities. They challenge the globalization project’s ongoing, forced displacement of people and non-human species and enable people to reimagine and defend their relationships to local communities and the land.

Social movement projects such as municipalism, right to the city movements, and transition towns all demonstrate models for organizing communities in ways that help people reimagine local identities and relationships and redefine their role in governing their communities. They build community control over economic and social practices that most directly impact people’s livelihoods, and in doing so help expand the spaces of political life. By centering place and relationships within and beyond particular communities, they help build more inclusive, intersectional politics and foster social cohesion, countering today’s dangerously polarized politics of resentment and exclusion.

Translocal practices offer an alternative paradigm—or “social operating system”—from that of globalized capitalism, one that imagines elements of a solidarity-supporting system. This paradigm prioritizes human rights and care over economic growth, interdependent over extractive relationships with the planet, cooperation over competition, knowledge ecologies over hegemonic Western science, long- over short-term, communities over individualism, and local over global scales ([See chart](#)). Using various strategies and organizational forms, they encourage the reimagining and *decolonization* of thinking as well as institutions and practices as a prerequisite for global solidarity.

Social movements have long promoted alternative ways of organizing global social relations, enacting what I’ve called a “human rights globalization” project.<sup>2</sup> Collecting observations about how people in diverse places around the world have responded to the disruptions and violence of capitalist globalization, we see remarkable similarities in the discourses and character of struggles. A desire for global and local societies that enable community control of land and supportive ecosystems, dignified and sustainable livelihoods, and social relations based on care and reciprocity are among key features of this emergent global project. Movements are also generating and popularizing transformative, intersectional identities based in non-hierarchical

and ecologically grounded social relations. Drawing from this long history, I highlight a few contemporary examples.

Today's struggles for collective human rights of indigenous peoples, peasants, women, and people of African descent are all significant in that they articulate transversal identities that help unite people beyond nation states while engaging them in formal inter-state political processes. The Permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples and the process advancing a similar forum for People of African Descent, UN Women, and UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants have created global spaces where identities that transcend and challenge existing state power are deepening and impacting both global and local spaces. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights—established in 1993 after decades of movement pressure—has strengthened institutional arrangements that bring people together across national borders and hold even powerful governments more accountable to global human rights standards. Ongoing engagement of social movements with this process has, in turn, generated new spaces for reimagining identities and promoting global solidarity.

Efforts to “bring human rights home” and make international law more meaningful for people's lives have encouraged the translocalization of human rights struggles, generating projects that expand *political and legal imaginations* and challenge prevailing power structures. For instance, the World Conference Against Racism helped forge global movement unity and generate more cohesive global pressure on governments to tackle structural racism and its effects. Translocal movement pressure led to a recent [seminal UN report](#) on systemic racism that was remarkably blunt in its condemnations of institutionalized racism and called for all governments to accelerate progress towards “transformative” and “comprehensive” changes, including reparations. Such work helps hold violators of rights—including institutions and systems—accountable and builds power and agency for marginalized local groups and global unity against right-wing and white supremacist movements.

Other examples of legal imagination include Stop Ecocide's campaign supporting the legal rights of nature by making ecocide a crime. The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty models other initiatives to mobilize municipalities to implement global treaties, including the Cities for CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) campaign and UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities initiative. Communities recognize that they don't need to wait for

political leadership from the national level to align their communities with the global human rights community. People's tribunals and efforts to create councils on future generations in local and national governments can highlight the urgency of today's social and ecological crises and promote more imagination in transformative problem-solving.

Complementing these efforts at the local level are social movement initiatives aimed at rolling back corporate power and supporting the democratization of national and local political institutions. This work is essential to making necessary changes possible. Neoliberal globalization and corporate growth have done great damage to our democracies, and local initiatives calling for greater transparency and public engagement in local policies from budgeting to policing to housing and economic development are essential for both ensuring people's basic needs, addressing climate change, and preventing the further escalation of violence and polarization. Initiatives to advance a global treaty on corporations and human rights, promote regulation and equity in global media and communications systems, and further other policies and institutions that rein in corporate power are all critical elements of work to build the world we need.

In sum, social movements working across locales are generating blueprints for a better world. What is needed is more people working to reimagine their own possible supportive roles improving, adapting, and advancing these. By converging translocally around new social, political, and legal imaginaries, global solidarity is possible!

## Endnotes

1. Bobby Banerjee, "Voices of the Governed: Towards a Theory of the Translocal," *Organization* 18, no. 3 (2011): 323-344, <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/6093/>.

2. Jackie Smith, "Making Other Worlds Possible: The Battle in Seattle in World-Historical Context," *Socialism and Democracy* 1 (2020): 114-137, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08854300.2019.1676030>; "Social Movements and Human Rights," in *Human Rights: Politics and Practice*, 3rd edition, ed. Michael Goodhart (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2021), [http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/39154/1/Smith%20Chapter%20in%20M%20Goodhart%20Human%20Rights\\_DScholarship%20Version.pdf](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/39154/1/Smith%20Chapter%20in%20M%20Goodhart%20Human%20Rights_DScholarship%20Version.pdf).

---

## About the Author



Jackie Smith is Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and the editor of the *Journal of World Systems Research*. Her research addresses the relationships between economic globalization, social conflicts, and popular struggles. She is involved locally with Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and coordinates the Pitt Human Rights Initiative. Her books include *Social Movements in the World System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation* (with Dawn Wiest); *Social Movements for Global Democracy*; *Coalitions across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (with Joe Bandy, ed.); and the *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese and Elizabeth Smythe, eds.).

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Jackie Smith, "The Power of Translocal Organizing," contribution to GTI Forum "Can Human Solidarity Globalize?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-solidarity-smith>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.